

# Swedish American Genealogist

---

Volume 4 | Number 3

Article 3

---

9-1-1984

## Soldiers' Surnames in Sweden

Alf Åberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Åberg, Alf (1984) "Soldiers' Surnames in Sweden," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 4 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol4/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

# Soldiers' Surnames in Sweden

Alf Åberg\*

In 1544 the Swedish *Riksdag* or Parliament decided at its session in the city of Västerås that the Swedish government should create a new army organization. The German mercenaries which had helped Gustavus Vasa in Sweden's liberation war with Denmark had proved too costly for the country and had also shown themselves to be virtually useless during Sweden's struggle against the rebels under the leadership of Nils Dacke in the forests of Småland. Now the *Riksdag* declared that Sweden was to have a national army with permanent units of Swedish soldiers, which were to be recruited among the farmers and peasants of the various provinces.

In the Articles of War, which Gustavus Vasa signed on 20 Sept. 1557 it was said that when soldiers were mustered into the army they were to be recorded with their correct Christian or baptismal name, a by-name and place of birth. By-name in this context meant the additional name or nickname, by which the young farmer boy or hired hand was known among his friends and acquaintances.

In the Royal Swedish War Archives in Stockholm we find on deposit an early muster roll dealing with soldiers in the province of Dalarna. The roll is dated 1545. The greater number of the 297 soldiers listed here, have, as would be expected, the typical *-son* name of his father or patronymic, but in this particular muster roll one will also find several persons with by-names. A few have names from the provinces from which they hailed—such as *Sigfrid Finne*, *Jöns Dalkarl*, *Engelbrekt Västgöte*. One also finds such ordinary trade names as *Skomakare* (Shoemaker), *Skräddare* (Tailor) and *Dagakarl* (Day laborer). The animal kingdom is represented by such names as *Bägge* (Ram), *Järpe* (Hazel-hen), *Kråka* (Crow), *Korp* (Raven), *Björn* (Bear). Others have simple soldiers' names of such classical versions as *Holst* (old Swedish for forest), *Bark* (Bark) and *Hård* (Hard).

These names have had a spontaneous beginning and have not been ordered by the commanding officers. It must have been for practical reasons that by-names were recorded in the muster roll. It made it easier for officers to keep tab on their men. Or perhaps the soldiers themselves wished to adopt names which made a hit when they encountered foreign soldiers from abroad, who all carried surnames.

---

\*Dr. Alf Åberg, Gyllenstiernsgatan 8, 115 26 Stockholm, Sweden, is the former head of the Royal Swedish War Archives. He has written extensively on many subjects, mainly on Swedish history.

*Dalregementet* (The Dalarna Regiment) seems to have been the first Swedish regiment, in which soldiers' names were used in a general way. Never has fantasy and inventiveness flowered more profusely than among the soldiers who dwelled along the shores of Lake Siljan. These names were concocted from every facet of life and times among the Dalarna farmers—*Näktergal* (Nightingale), *Björnunge* (Bear cub), *Räven* (The Fox), *Tjuren* (The Bull), *Sugga* (Sow), *Gök* (Cuckoo)—not to forget such trade names which will be found in the rolls, such as *Gruvdräng* (Miner's apprentice), *Grytgjutare* (Iron pot foundryman), *Tornbyggare* (Tower builder) and *Hakeskytt* (Match lock gunner).

Many of the names were quite expressive—thus we have *Talför* (Verbose), *Spader Knekt* (Jack of Spades), *Välgifter* (Well married), *Alltid Glad* (Always Happy), *Kåhlhufvud* (Cabbage head), *Jungfrupilt* (Virgin boy), *Nygift* (Newly married) and *Dunderkarl* (Hell of a guy). If we examine the area of alcoholic spirits we find such names as *Rus* (Inebriation), *Birkarl* (Beer drinker), *Vingalen* (Crazy from wine), *Drucken* (Drunk or inebriated), *Odrucken* (Sober). These names must have been personal and somehow signified something which was characteristic for the new recruit. The remarkable thing is that sometimes the name was applied to the *rote* (the district, comprising several farms, which the soldier represented). Thus the next occupant of the *rote* or district would inherit the name, even though his personal character had nothing whatsoever to do with that of the previous soldier.

Perhaps it was the military organization which was peculiar to Dalarna, which was the source of the early naming of soldiers. Already in 1614—long before other Swedish provinces—the farmers residing in Dalarna had promised that they would, in war as well as in peace, keep and maintain a military force consisting of 1,400 soldiers, on the condition that they were spared the onerous duty of furnishing soldiers to the army. This principle did not carry through in the other Swedish provinces, which were less populated than Dalarna and it was not until the major military reforms of King Charles XI in the 1680s, when Sweden received its famous *indelningsverk*, that the country could muster a permanent army. This well publicized and excellent system called *indelningsverket*, was built upon the principle that each province in Sweden was divided into so many military districts or *rotar* (the singular is *rote*). Each *rote* was made up of so many farms, which were responsible for the furnishing of a soldier, his uniform and his cottage, called *soldattorp* (soldier's croft). Each province had its own regiment and the regiment was made up of companies, which in turn were made up of the soldiers from the *rotar* in the company district.

It was only with the advent of *indelningsverket* some 300 years ago that the soldiers in other provinces began to assume other surnames rather than the ancient patronymic or *-son* name.

It was different in Dalarna. During the 17th century almost all of the soldiers in this province used by-names, which had been formed according to the principles already outlined. Several recruits were mustered with names they must have been known by in their home parish—*Lille Nils* (Little Nils), *Björka-Pelle* (Pehr from Björk) and *Svarte Pelle* (Black Peter). Some very peculiar names can also be found, such as *Pamphilius* and *Habakkuk*, *Goliath* and *Spiculeribus*—all belong to that specific Biblical world, with which the Dalekarlians were so well acquainted, as well as to their well documented love and regard for the holy Latin language.

With the advent of *indelningsverket* and the establishment of regiments in most Swedish provinces, military surnames became common in the entire Swedish army. It was no longer a spontaneous action on the part of the soldiers themselves, but the naming procedure became accepted officially. Every soldier received a given number in his company at the time of enrollment and in connection with this numbering he was also given a surname. In an official proclamation, signed by Charles XI in 1690, it was stated that regular muster rolls were to be established for every regiment and that these rolls were to record the soldier's baptismal name, his patronymic as well as his military surname. It is from this time that the muster rolls on deposit in the Royal Swedish War Archives are for the most part complete.

It was the company commander, usually a captain, who decided the names the recruits should have. Each infantry regiment had 150 *rotar* or military districts and each *rote* was named for the first soldier assigned to that district. His name was then inherited by the soldiers, which followed him, even though the former occupant and the present occupant were not related. The surnames were no longer characteristic for the bearer, and the soldiers named *Lång* and *Liten* (Tall and Small) kept the names despite their respective heights. If the soldier moved from one *rote* to another, which happened occasionally, he took the name from the new *rote*. Thus if anyone wishes to follow the story of the soldiers during their military service, one must not neglect a single muster roll, since there is the risk of losing the quarry, if a name change has occurred.

Many of the colorful and frisky names disappeared from the muster rolls during the long wars fought by Charles XII during 1700–1718 and were replaced by simpler and more obvious names. A usual type consisted of personal characteristics—such as *Modig* (Courageous), *Orädd* (Brave), *Hård* (Hard), *Stadig* (Sturdy) and *Våghals* (Daring), but also *Glad* (Happy), *Frisk* (Alert), *Frimodig* (Valiant) and *Trogen* (Faithful). Perhaps it was under the influence of the temperance movement that the *rote* in Dalarna with the name of *Drucken* (Drunk) was changed in 1849 to *Nykter* (Sober).

Many military names were taken from the animal kingdom—thus we find *Björn* (Bear), *Bock* (Ram), *Bäver* (Beaver), *Ren* (Reindeer), *Varg* (Wolf) and *Vädur* (Ram). All the birds of the forest gave names to the soldiers as did the vegetable kingdom and the world of insects—*Fluga* (Fly), *Geting* (Wasp), *Humla* (Bumblebee), *Mygg* (Mosquito) and *Myra* (Ant).

The various implements and tools used on the Swedish farms furnished many soldiers with names—*Hacka* (Hoe), *Skopa* (Ladle), *Klubba* (Club), *Hammare* (Hammer), *Stake* (Stake) and *Stolpe* (Post). We also find many names alluding to various kinds of weaponry as well as names of tradesmen and craftsmen, not forgetting the many names which have their origin in the soldier's home parish.

A great many names were formed from the farms, where the recruits had worked prior to joining the army. The soldier from Ekeby was called *Ekman* whereas his neighbor, who was employed on a farm named Vinna, became *Vinberg*. Five soldiers from the village of Hidingsta in Hardemo Parish (Öre.) received the names of *Hind*, *Hindberg*, *Hidberg*, *Hidman* and *Hiding*. Sometimes the names can be typed as puns, as when a soldier from a place named Nästorp is called *Näsvis* (Impertinent) or his colleague from Trävestorp is named *Träfot* (Wooden foot). The soldiers who served the farms of Valma and Boxerud were given the names of *Valfisk* (Whale) and *Buxbom* (Boxwood).

Many of the soldiers in the armies of Charles XII already then had soldiers' names which we recognize today from Vilhelm Moberg's epic novel, *Raskens*, which takes place in the middle of the 19th century. *Rask* (Swift) and *Klang* (Ringing sound), *Stål* (Steel) and *Lod* (Weight), *Sköld* (Shield) and *Modig* (Courageous), *Stolt* (Proud), *Duva* (Dove) and *Sträng* (Strict) and hundreds of other soldiers' names have slipped into our consciousness and have become forever tied to the old army organization, which was operative until 1901.

In addition to these names there were others, less well-known, which were popular during certain phases of Swedish history and were then quickly lost, due to personal tastes. These names are especially interesting since they tell us much about the moods and interests of the officers serving in the army organization.

Ever since the end of the 17th century it was the company commanders who were responsible for naming the soldiers. Some of the soldiers adopted the name of the *rote* or district, while others were renamed by the army command. The same situation pertained in the cavalry. This naming procedure one can study at close hand by examining a portable muster roll from 1732, kept by Capt. Samuel Cavallin for his own use at his regiment, *Södra skånska kavalleriregementet* (South Skåne Cavalry Regiment). In this muster roll the captain has himself recorded such exotic names for his cavalymen as *Kronström* (Crown stream), *Råstierna* (New star) *Sunnanväder* (South wind), *Fläderbuske* (Elderberry bush) and many others. The recruits must have accepted these names as names of distinction. They often asked to be given names, used by well-known persons. On several occasions the King forbade privates, whether cavalymen or soldiers, to take names which belonged to the nobility or titled persons and when musters were held, such names were to be stricken from the record. These pronouncements, however, were not always heeded.

The pastoral poem and the awakened interest in the rustic life marked the middle of the 18th century. The soldiers were then often given names which suggested a pastoral setting—such as *Åkerman* and *Landman* (both meaning farmer) as well as *Torpare* (crofter). The renewed interest in classicism during the reign of Gustaf III and the resultant fad of studying the antiquity of Greece and Rome were soon reflected in the muster rolls. *Platon* (Plato) and *Solon* become Swedish recruit names. The gods and goddesses of Mt. Olympus descended from the heavenly abodes to enter the crofts and cabins of the Swedish soldiers, bestowing upon them such names as *Mars* and *Bacchus*, *Hercules* and *Cupido*, *Nestor* and *Apollo* and even *Eos* and *Venus*.

Many younger Swedish officers sought permission to enter foreign military service during the 18th century in order to gain experience in the study of fortifications, military drill and battle strategy. Approximately eighty of these Swedish officers served with the French forces in the struggles in the Caribbean and on the North American continent in the American War of Independence. Most of them returned to Sweden, filled with awe and respect for the French art of war. The love of the French language, which permeated the upper classes in Sweden during the latter part of the 18th century, is also mirrored in the muster rolls. A hired hand by the name of Jonas Håkansson was renamed *Woltaire*, while another recruit was given the name *Rousseau*. There were common soldiers named *Patroull*, *Complet*, *Bonjour*, *Piruet*, *Orrphé* and others walking around as living testimony of the love which their company commanders nurtured for “la belle France”.

The French Revolution did not pass by unnoticed in the soldiers' rolls. One recruit was named *Maratt* for Jean Paul *Marat* and the brave French Marshal Lazare *Hoche* gave his name to a recruit in the Kalmar Regiment. Of Napoleon's military commanders it seems that Marshal Michel *Ney* was most admired by the Swedish officers, for his name is to be found as the name of many soldiers in various regiments. The battles of the Napoleonic wars have also inspired the naming of Swedish soldiers—thus we find *Austerlitz*, *Aurstadt*, *Fridland* and *Poo*, as well as those in Finland during Sweden's war with Russia 1808–1809 on the rolls. The name of *Lappo* for a soldier reminds Swedes of the Russian conflict, when Finland was lost to the neighbor to the East.

The new Romanticism made its entry at the beginning of the 19th century and a new generation of officers were gripped by a deep appreciation for the old Norse and the Goths of prehistory. The gods of the Greek antiquity were replaced by the gods of the Teutonic mythology. *Tor* and *Frej* became the most common soldiers' names during this period, but we also find *Oden* and *Balder*. The Viking world furnishes the motif for such names as *Rolf*, *Bard* (one who composed epic Viking poetry), *Viking* and *Runsten* (a runic inscription). The soldier who was named *Faust* must have had a company commander who was an admirer of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. At the Älvsborg Regiment there was a company commander who had read



the Swedish poet, Esaias Tegnér's famous epic poem *Frithiofs saga*. As a result of his infatuation with this piece of literature he gave his recruits such names as *Björn* and *Frithiof*, *Ring* and *Bele*, all taken from his favorite reading.

Long before the people of the rural population in Sweden discarded their *-son* names or patronymics and adopted surnames, their sons and hired men, who had become soldiers and cavalymen, carried names which were both colorful and rich in fantasy. How did the soldiers themselves react about their surnames, when they, as they were pensioned off, left military life? Some must have been bothered by the exotic and sometimes unintelligible names they bore and which in a manner separated them from the other men in the village. Sometimes the soldiers' wives were the victims of ridicule because of their husbands' names. A soldier named *Örn* (Eagle) asked to have his name changed, since his children were referred to as "örnungar" (eaglets). The soldier named *Drivare* (Drifter), the third in a row from the same *rote* to carry the name, asked to be called *Lax* (Salmon).

In many cases the children dropped their soldier fathers' names because they felt that the names were old-fashioned, ugly or too drastic. But a surprisingly large number of soldiers' names remained alive and were carried on by the heirs of the soldier or cavalryman. Among the names of many of the famous Swedes of the 20th century we can identify such soldier names as Per Edvin *Sköld*, former Swedish Minister for Defense; Gunnar *Sträng*, former Swedish Minister of Finance; Torsten *Rapp*, Commander-in-Chief of the Swedish Defense Forces; Jan-Otto *Modig*, former president of Radio Sweden; Vilhelm *Moberg*, author of the emigrant epic, *The Emigrants*.

Among the names, derived from farm names, there are many which today remind us of the old army organization, even though some of them have been changed for euphemistic reasons. A soldier from Dalarna who saw service in the 1730s was named *Dobblare* (Gambler), presumably because he was fond of gambling. He gave his name to the *rote* or district he served. The name still exists as a farm name but has across the years been changed to *Duvar*—a totally unintelligible word, unless one understands its history.

Many of the soldiers from the old army system remained in military service long after the new system was inaugurated in 1901. The last of these soldiers was a non-commissioned officer by the name of *Frej*, who died last year. The memory of these soldiers is still very strong and live in the consciousness of the Swedish people. Many of the thousands of the soldiers' crofts, *torp*, still exist and have been turned into cottages by vacationing Swedes. These soldiers constituted a stable work force for the Swedish State. It was solely by means of their efforts that Sweden could carry out such mammoth construction jobs as the building of the Göta Canal and the giant fortress at Karlsborg. The soldiers were generally well accepted in their communities. They early learned to read and write. During times of peace they earned their livelihood as *torpare* (crofters), but they also moonlighted

as teachers, organ pumpers in the parish church and as tapestry painters in the various farm houses. They never sought to be a breed apart but were always accepted as a dependable and well-liked part of the civilian community. Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the outstanding Finnish-Swedish poet, has written an epic series of poems entitled *Fänrik Ståls sägner* (*The Tales of Ensign Stål*). The soldier's widow as well as the operator of the soldiers' canteen is Lotta Svärd, who has given her name to the voluntary aid service organization of the Swedish Defense Forces—they are called "lottor", (singular *lotta*). In another way the Swedes are very conscious of the past history of these soldiers. Given any large party or social occasion, one can be sure that there will always be one or more who carry the old military surname.

There are many interesting problems which crop up for those seeking name forms in the old regimental muster rolls. In the first batch of soldiers recruited for *Norra skånska kavalleriregementet* (North Skåne Cavalry Regiment) during the 1680s, there was a cavalryman who in the rolls is named *Lille Måns Konung Davids Gosse* (Little Måns King David's Boy). The surname or perhaps nickname is to be found in the official regimental accounts as well as in the parish records. In the oldest extant parish record of Hästveda Parish (Krist.) one can read about him, that he was born in Västergötland in 1621 and became attached as a boy to the supply corps in the Swedish army during the war with the Danes 1644. He came to Skåne, when the province was captured from the Danes in 1658 and then served as a cavalryman until 1690 when he retired. In 1663 he had married a woman from neighboring Glimåkra Parish (Krist.) and had with her ten children, all of whom died before he did. At Christmastime 1704 he fell off his horse, as he was making the rounds in the parish, asking for alms for himself and his indigent wife from "Christian" people of the parish. He then remained bedridden until 4 Feb. 1705, when he died—84 years old.

In the very detailed death notice the clergyman does not seek to explain why *Lille Måns* had this peculiar name. Did it have any relationship to his character or his appearance or does it have something to do with a Bible story? Did he get his name when in his youth he helped the driver of the army supply corps wagons named *Kung David* (King David)? Måns could then have become King David's boy, a name he then kept, even as a mature cavalryman. During more than a half century he served his country faithfully and well, and his peculiar name he retained even as a weatherbeaten old warrior, when he fell from his horse and was taken to the Hästveda Cemetery for his final rest.

---

#### Literature

- Sten Kreüger, "Anteckningar om knektarnas namn vid Kronobergs regemente" in *Hyltén-Cavalliusföreningens årsbok* 1948, Växjö.
- Harry Ståhl, "Skamper och Snäller, Spikuleribus och Syrak." Något om Dalarnes soldatnamn in *Bonäs bygdegård* 1981.
- Elfred Kumm, *Indelt soldat och rotebonde* (Stockholm 1949).